

Interview with Albert Hegetschweiler

Interview with Albert Hegetschweiler at his wood shop, Soborg Woodworking Company, 1429 Clinton Street, Hoboken, New Jersey, on January 31, 1989. Robert Foster, president and curator of the Hoboken Historical Museum, conducted the interview, part of an ongoing, maritime-related series for the Museum.

The Hoboken Historical Museum was founded in 1986 to stimulate interest in the city's history, architecture, and the genealogy of its residents. The Museum offers exhibits, lectures, and walking tours, maintains a museum space in Hoboken's City Hall, and publishes a magazine. It also assists in the preservation of historic documents and landmarks, and acquires artifacts relating to city history. The Museum works with organizations with similar interests to create educational programs.

The Museum began its maritime oral history project in the late 1980s to document the last surviving remnants of the industries that served the once-busy New York/New Jersey Harbor (when, as one interviewee put it, "traffic jams occurred on the river instead of the roadways.") Planned or completed interviews include: Tugboat captains (including one of the few female tug captains in the harbor), a tugboat company owner, a yardman in the Lackawanna maritime division, a "fireman" (or boiler operator) for steam-operated tugs owned by the railroads, a maritime woodworker, a "floatsman" (barge worker), the owner of a dry dock, and the son of a barge captain who spent his childhood years living on the barge.

Albert Hegetschweiler (born 1914 in Weehawken, New Jersey) has been involved in the Northern New Jersey maritime industry since the early 1920s, and learned the wood working trade in the 1930s in an apprenticeship with skilled woodworkers employed by his uncle, Mr. Soborg, whose company he now owns. Most of the men in his extended family worked in the maritime industry, several as turbine engineers or wood turners – trades now extinct or extremely rare.

Robert Foster: It's January 31, 1989 and we're in the Soborg Woodworking Company's workshop. Could you tell us who you are, and how you're connected to this business?

Albert Hegetschweiler: My name is Albert Hegetschweiler, but I'm mostly known as Heget; and I run the Soborg Woodworking Company on 1429 Clinton Street here in Hoboken.

Foster: And where were you born?

Hegetschweiler: I was born quite locally here. I was born on 110 Maple Street, in Weehawken.

Foster: And when was that?

Hegetschweiler: That was on January first, New Year's Day, 1914.

Foster: How did you get started in the woodworking business?

Hegetschweiler: As far as the business here, how I started here basically was as a child. My father died when I was six years old and my mother moved in with her sister and her husband, who was Mr. Soborg, and more or less, he brought me up. I would work down here in the summertime, but doing mostly just sweeping around, running errands, and things like that. One of the funny errands that I always had, that everybody gets a kick out of, there was about seven or eight men working here and each one had a beer can, and a little before twelve o'clock there was a speakeasy across the road, and I had a long stick with a bunch of nails, so one wouldn't bump into the other, and I'd have to go over to the speakeasy and get the beer cans filled. They chipped together and gave me a nickel for going for the beer.

Foster: And when did you start learning the wood working business? How did that happen?

Hegetschweiler: As far as starting down here in the business, my mother as well as my aunt, they had it all cut and dried, that I'm going to go to work down here. When it came the time that I got out of high school, and time to come down here, my uncle and my

mother and aunt and myself were all sitting around the kitchen table having supper. And he says to my mother: "Well I suppose you think Albert's coming down to the shop." And of course the two women had that all set. And he says to my mother: "This is what we're going to do. The first year that he comes down here, you pay me five dollars a week for the material that he ruins. The second year he works for nothing. And the third year, I pay him five dollars a week." So my mother saw red. She couldn't see that. She didn't mind me coming down for a year working for nothing, but she couldn't see paying him five dollars for me to be here. So I didn't go down. I finally got a job in a garage for thirty-five cents an hour, and I worked for two years in the garage. Then he got sick and he couldn't come down to the shop and he called me into his bedroom and he says: "You'd better go down to the shop and see what you can do." Now I didn't know that much about the shop, other than hanging around down here. Lucky for me they had a foreman, name was Arthur Kowalski. He was born here in Union City, and he had gone through pretty much the same thing. His uncle had been a stair builder. Basically he had learned the trade, but he was still afraid of the uncle. So he and his cousin were installing stairs in all these brownstones around here and the union delegate wanted to get him an apprentice card. So they got the apprentice card but it took him six weeks to eight weeks before he dared show it to the uncle. And when they did, they only threw it at him and ran. So anyway, he had gone through that, so lucky for me, he took me under his arm and he was the foreman here, so he started me to learn and take care of everything. If it wasn't for him I really would have been in a problem. Because of the old timers. They were very good tradesman, from the other side. But one of them, we had a wood carver here and I was a small little kid just looking at him from a distance and he raised merry cane with me. He said, points up to his head: "What's in my head goes in the ground. Nobody looks." So that's the kind of people we had to deal with. You had to go through a whole apprenticeship or you didn't get anywhere.

Foster: Could you tell me about the formation of the Soborg Woodworking Company, how it started?

Hegetschweiler: The formation of the Soborg Woodworking Company began with Mr. Soborg. He came to this country from Norway and he went to the west coast, to Seattle. In the mills out there, he was a wood turner from the other side. But he was turning spindles for stairs out there, out of the waste lumber. He went back to Norway. And then he came back again. And the second trip he went back to the west coast to the same place, but then he came back and settled around here somewhere, I couldn't tell you where, exactly. He was working for Todd's, the shipyards here, and they found out that he could carve. Of course back in those days, every boat in the river, practically every boat in the river, on top of the pilothouse, had an American eagle. And he was carving eagles for Todd shipyards. And all of a sudden, up went a light, and he said: "Why should I carve them for Todd's when I can go in business for myself?" So over on Fourteenth Street, under the viaduct someplace, he rented a little loft and he began carving eagles. That must have been, taking a guess, about 1906. But then he built this place here in 1908. It's built out of secondhand lumber. When he got over here he started to do some carving but so many other lines came in, by the time the building was going and World War I was starting, he got more into the maritime line – working with the ships and a ship joiner shop as well as making industrial parts. But that's where he started: the eagles.

Foster: Did Mr. Soborg work on the ships?

Hegetschweiler: He never went on the ships. Arty, his foreman, was much better on that particular thing. Arty was the foreman. He was a crackerjack machine man and they also had an Italian fellow, Rocco Mancini, who was a crackerjack hand man. So I had two good teachers. Though I am not quite that good with my hands as I am with a machine. But I got the principle. On board the ships, what happened here is usually there would be chairs that were broken, there were doors that didn't work, there were drawers that didn't pull.

They needed grates that were broken, wooden grates on the decks and stuff like that, that needed replacement. Chucks for under the lifeboats and rotten fastenings that needed to be replaced. We are not to be confused with ship's carpenters. They were the ones with the hammers and the nails and the screws and stuff like that. We did the better work, the internal work.

Foster: Can you tell me about a job that was particularly memorable?

Hegetschweiler: I can remember there was a Lord's Dry Dock, up in North Bergen, and one of the wet dock outfits had a job of converting a small freighter into a small passenger ship for the Venezuelan government. This was before I was working here steady. It was in the summertime and Arty, the foreman, took me up there to give him a hand measuring. They were going to put a full mahogany flight of stairs in the ship. It was one of those flights of stairs where you'd come up in the middle and stairs go on both sides and they meet up again at the top. Of course, working on a ship, there's nothing square. Everything is ship shape. So we measured everything. We didn't believe in rulers on a ship. We always had long sticks with us and we'd tape them together or tack them together until we'd get the right length where it's going to fit. So the whole flight of mahogany stairs we built right down here in the shop, and they were all taken up to Lord's Dry Dock, and we get up there, and get it on board the ship, and nothing fits. It just didn't fit no how. We just couldn't figure it out. The sticks didn't fit anymore even. So one of the engineers from the engineering company -- we were down in the hole -- he yells down: "Hey, Arty, you having trouble? You know what you can do with them stairs? Throw them overboard and go make another set. We moved the bulkhead to another location." In those days, you didn't care what went into the river, so all those mahogany stairs went in the river. Let them go adrift. Brand new. We made another flight of stairs and the wet dock people realized they were going bankrupt. So they come up there to my uncle and told him they were going to go

bankrupt, so "when you put your bills in, put them in for twenty or twenty-five times what they're supposed to be," so at least he came out about right.

Foster: There were lots of fires and disasters on the waterfront. Did you experience any of those?

Hegetschweiler: I remember seeing the *Woodrow Wilson* burning. That was during World War I. That was in Todd's for repair, a troop ship. I was living in an apartment right above the viaduct here and I remember at night watching those flames coming out of that ship. Of course, you had so many steamship companies here. You had the Danish or Scandinavian lines that went to most of the Scandinavian countries. I remember they had a big red stripe around the stack with a black stack. They were mostly named after kings from Denmark. They came in at about Sixteenth Street, I guess. And downtown you had the Holland America Line and all those ships down there.

Foster: Did you mostly work on Scandinavian and Dutch ships?

Hegetschweiler: During World War II, we worked on a lot of Polish ships, because they were at sea when the war broke out and they became part of our fleet. They were merchant ships, the Gardenia Line. The ships were not in the best shape and believe it or not, the crew didn't have a place to eat on them. They only had a tin plate and they had to go to the galley and stick their plate in there and get their drink and food and eat along the deck or wherever they could find space. Of course the United States wouldn't stand for that. That ship wasn't sailable that way. So we had to make several dining quarters and tables and stuff and they had to change things around. Even though they were Polish ships, they were American convoys and they had to come up to the standards. We did a lot of changing around on those things. All the metal work was done by the engineering companies. They made the room and we made the furniture, the tables and chairs, and things for them to sit on. Cutting blocks in the kitchen to cut meat on, and stuff like that.

Foster: Is there a job you remember that was really unusual?

Hegetschweiler: We had the Seatrain Line here. They were right up here in the north end of Hoboken, too, taking railroad cars down south to Texas City and so forth. They put a new ship in the fleet called the *Seatrain Express*, and they came over to the shop because the governor of Texas at the time had given them a tremendous set of long horns. They must have been almost eight feet across and we had to mount them in the dining area on the wall. Mount them together on a plaque and hang them on the ship. That was the *Seatrain Texas*.

Foster: How many men would work on a job like that?

Hegetschweiler: I was working here with three men, in the middle of the fifties. Three men and myself. Before that, I had seven men.

Foster: Tell me about the eagles, the eagles carved here in the shop

Hegetschweiler: The eagles were carved in white pine, which was easy to carve. Eagles were very popular back in the days of ferryboats and tugboats. Most every one of them had to have an American eagle with its wings spread on top of the pilothouses. What always amazed me was that the ferryboats had two pilothouses, one on each end, and when the ferry was going to New York from here, the one of the other end was flying backwards. Of course, they don't fly, but they were facing in the wrong direction for where they were going. There was a big demand for these eagles. Everybody who had a boat had to have an eagle. It was like a fad. These woodcarvers trimmed most of it out on the band saw, roughed it out, and then carved them by hand. They were pretty fast at it too. I mean, it might have taken them a day or two to make an eagle.

Foster: And how big were they?

Hegetschweiler: The size of them more or less depended on the size of the pilothouse. On a tugboat, there'd only be a wingspread of three foot or so. On a good size ferry boat, the wingspread could be four, four and half foot, anyway, depending on the size of the boat, so that it looked right, and not like a wart on a camel's back. Most all were

painted gold. They were gold eagles. Some painted them other ways, but most of the time they were painted gold.

Foster: Did Soborg paint them?

Hegetschweiler: He had nothing to do with the painting of them. He just carved them out of wood. Actually, when he built this shop, the carving of the eagles almost disappeared because he could make more money doing other stuff.

Foster: Like what?

Hegetschweiler: Woodturning was his main line in this shop. He was a terrific wood turner. Of course, he had learned the woodturning trade in Europe. When he was out in Seattle, he worked piecework, and when you work piecework, you learn how to turn in a hurry. He was the fastest turner. I've seen a lot of turners in my years but no one stood alongside him in woodturning. He'd start eight o'clock in the morning, take a half hour for lunch, quit at four o'clock. And if it was a simple turning, a simple baluster, he could knock out two hundred balusters in a day. He never callipered, it was all by eye. He wore glasses you pinched on your nose, the old-fashioned ones you just pinched on your nose. And he couldn't see through them. There was nothing but curls of shavings hanging on them, when he was looking over the top of them. He never turned the lathe off from when it got started in the morning until lunchtime. He threw everything in on the fly. So he was a terrific wood turner. With all the building going on it was in great demand. Of course, nowadays, it's all done automatically. Where I fit in is, I can match the old broken ones.

Foster: Tell me about your parents.

Hegetschweiler: My father and mother were widow and widower when they got married. My father had had three sons with his first wife. My mother had no children. My father was a triple expansion steam turbine man in Fletcher's Shipyard, and he was a very good friend of one of the Fletchers. In fact, Mr. Fletcher was his best man when he got married to my mother. I have a camera home in at trunk that Mr. Fletcher gave my father

when he got married. Then, of course, I came along, which I wasn't supposed to do, because my mother was forty-three, and never had a child before. So that's where I came into the picture. My half-brother was the head pattern maker at Fletcher's, in the shipyard, and his son worked in Fletcher's, which became Bethlehem Steel. He was a turbine engineer, too, the son of my brother.

Foster: You told me once that just about everyone in your family was connected to ships in some way, even if indirectly. Was the connection only to the shipyards, or did it involve the ferries, which were such a prominent fixture in Hoboken for so long? •

Hegetschweiler: Talking about ferry boats, I can tell you this: I had an uncle, my father's sister was married to him. A Mister Henberg, who had a florist on Washington Street. He must have started there in 1910. He had, at one time, the largest window, the largest glass window in Hoboken. Nobody in this country made glass that big, so he had to get it in France. It didn't come into Hoboken; it came in on the other side of the river. So they had to bring it over here. Now that was a problem, because they had to ride it on a flat, and it wouldn't fit through the ferry where the side wheels were. It wouldn't go through. So he had to rent a ferry after the last trip at night, and a horse and wagon. The pane of glass went on to the ferry and the ferry turned around in the river and came in on the Jersey side, so the horse could back off the ferry with the pane of glass. It wouldn't pass through the side wheels. So that's a little side story. I remember that. •

And Mr. Henberg had the greatest business in connection with the waterfront – even though it was a florist. Way back in his day, he got involved with this business of the telephone and the flowers. So many of the people that came to this country went out west and all over the country, came back to go to Europe for a visit. Whenever any foreigners were here and they got enough money together, and could afford it, they'd have to go back and show off what they made in the United States and how wonderful it was. Which it is, let's face it. Anyway, when they would leave, a lot of ships left from Hoboken. When you're

out in a small town in the Midwest, or anywhere throughout the country, and you want to send bon voyage flowers, the man to look up in the telephone book when the ship says it's sailing from Hoboken, there's only one florist in the book. He was busy. He had a big business here. In fact, I have pictures. He had two wagons for delivery and later on he had two trucks. They were Model T Fords, delivering flowers to all the ships. He became a wealthy man with that florist's. Later on it was taken over by a Mr. Rogel, but that was quite a few years later. I believe that same building today has a plumbing company in it. He was way ahead in the florist business, there was no competition at all. He had quite a business.

Foster: Were there other businesses that served the ships directly?

Hegetschweiler: Consolidated Laundry, up there in Jersey City, they met the ships. The Brunswick Laundry met the ships. I've seen their trucks around. They must have dealt with linen and stuff. Foodstuffs and supplies like that all came from the city, New York City. There were more ships over there than there were in Hoboken. You had North German Lloyd here, Holland American, and the Scandinavian Lines. That's basically the ones that were here in Hoboken.

Foster: You mentioned the Gardenia Line before. Can you tell me more about them?

Hegetschweiler: During the war, one of the cargo ships we worked with was the Gardenia Line, the Polish boats. We worked with some others, but the prime engineering firm that we worked with were pretty much in this Gardenia Line. Of course, it was wartime, and now I can talk about it because all of the companies I was working with are all gone. Believe it or not, I was ripe for draft age, and I got excused from the service on occupation. But at one time it was six weeks. One time it was two weeks. I didn't know where I was as far as that was concerned, or depending on what were doing here, what priorities we had. We worked quite a lot for them, for what I considered good, fair prices. For what I was charging the marine outfits. Believe it or not, they come up here, twice they came up here,

and told me right up and down, wanted to know what's the matter with me. "You're not charging enough!" I always had in the back of my head, well, I'm going to be drafted, if I don't keep going. And as I say, I made a pretty good dollar. I was well pleased with the prices I was getting. As a matter of fact, I even felt tha I was padding the bill a little bit. They come up here and told me right up and down that I had to charge at least ten times more than what I was charging, because they could only charge a commission on it. If the price is too low, they're not making anything on it. I lost several jobs through that because I didn't charge enough. They wanted me to have it but I couldn't see it. It got to a point where it was ridiculous. I remember one particular incident. Just a little board to hang ten keys on, and at that time I charged, I think, ten or twelve dollars for it, which was, at the time, a damn good price. And they came up and told me they should be two hundred dollars apiece. So that's where your money went. At two hundred dollars, if they got ten percent, they got something, but on ten or twelve dollars, it was nothing. So that was a wartime problem that we had here. But I had enough work here to keep me out of the service.

Foster: Who has been your most steady customer?

Hegetschweiler: One big job that ran continuous was for the Englishtown Cutlery Company. A stick with a bunch of cuts to hold knives and forks. They made the boxes and all we only made the wooden stick. I made so many thousands and thousands of them, I don't know, and then when you figure out the cutlery that has to go in there, my God.

Foster: What can you tell me about the newspaper hat you're wearing?

Hegetschweiler: You want to know about my hat. Well, I use a paper hat here all winter long because I can make a new one every day. Or, if it's slightly dirty, I just throw it away and make another one. The story about the paper hat, it's really a pressman's hat, what the newspaper people wear. Years ago, I was involved with the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts and all that business, and I brought a bunch of Cub Scouts to the *Bergen Record* in Hackensack, on a tour. They saw these men with these hats on and of course they wanted a

hat. Well, of course, the men were busy. They couldn't bother making a kid a hat. I spoke to the tour fellow that took us around and said: "Gee, they're great. The kids love those hats. Is there any way we could learn? And he says: "Possibly we can publish a cut out." They had a section that was mostly for kids. I don't know if it was a Tuesday or a Monday. But they would put in how to fold them, which they did weeks later. Then I practiced from that. They're strong, for a paper hat. Everybody seems to know me by the paper hat. The funny part about it, sometime I get in the car and forget I have it on, and I stop to go to the store with a paper hat on. I don't realize I have it on, because I have it on all day long. The nice thing is, you can throw it away and have a clean one.

Foster: Are there any other stories you want to tell us?

Hegetschweiler: I can tell you a funny story. I lived in Cliffside Park and on Thanksgiving I had an aunt and uncle that lived out in Brooklyn. It was the family routine, that we all went out there for Thanksgiving and they came to us for Christmas. Anyway, this particular time, there was some cousin of my mother who lived out in Wharton, Oklahoma. Had a farm out there. He was a real farmer. He played a violin and somehow or another he thought he had a Stradivarius violin. So he came to New York and naturally came to our house and stayed with us, and had to go to some people in New York to find out if it was a Stradivarius, which it wasn't. But it was Thanksgiving time and we went to Brooklyn. It was five cents across the ferry. We walked up the Broadway. And it was five cents on the subway, all the way out to Flatbush. Then we came home at night and it would be eleven or twelve o'clock by the time we'd get to the ferry. Come across on the ferry. There was quite a group of us. My Uncle Soborg, who had the shop here, he goes first and there's a turnstile with a lady sitting inside and he pays for so many. For the whole group of us. Now this old farmer, from out in Oklahoma, his name was Alf Lund, he was deaf, quite deaf. He wore one of those old fashioned things that you'd put to your ear like a horn. So we were all running through the turnstile, cause my uncle paid for seven, or eight, or ten, whatever we

were in the group, and the lady, she's got the thing that can stop the turnstile from going around. Alf is being a gentleman farmer and he let a couple people go ahead of him and when he got there the darn thing stopped. He was trying to turn that damn turnstile and couldn't understand why it wouldn't go around. And she's yelling, the lady's yelling at him in there, and he can't hear, and he's gotta go in his coat and get this horn out and stick it in his ear, and stick it in the window. By this time we're missing Alf, and we see him pushing the damn thing. We had to go back and pay for him, and I always got a kick out of that.

Foster: What else can you tell us about the ferries that were in this area? They were such an important part of the transportation system at one time.

Hegetschweiler: The electric ferries, they were in Weehawken right over where the Lincoln Tunnel is now. There was a big long ramp from Boulevard East, a wooden structure that you go out to the water to get on the ferryboat. They only took automobiles; they didn't take passengers.

Foster: Why did they call them electric ferries?

Hegetschweiler: They called them electric ferries because they were run by motors that were diesel-electric. In other words, diesel-generated, motor-driven. The last of the electric ferries that I know of, they were running from Brooklyn to Staten Island. It's quite a few years back now, but that's about the last that I can remember.

The Forty-Second Street Ferry, leaving from Weehawken, there were two different lines. One went directly across the river to Forty-Second Street, which was called the Forty-Second Street Ferry, and the other one was the same company, I believe, it was called the West Shore Ferry Company. It went from Weehawken to Cortland Street. It was a long, nice ride down the river. That was to bring people downtown. So that was the run of the ferries. The 125th Street ferry just crossed the river from 125th Street to Edgewater. The beauty of those times was that they ran all night. In the wee hours they were every half-hour, but there wasn't such a thing as any of them closing down. It ran all night long. All the ferries ran all

night long. Most of the time, it was just one boat going back and forth in the wee hours. When you got on the Jersey side, whether for Forty-second Street or the Edgewater one, the trolley cars met the ferry, and you could go anywhere in the State of New Jersey on trolley cars. Wherever you wanted to go. You could take the 125th Street ferry and got to Suffern, New York, by trolley car, by changes. You could go all through Hudson County, and the same with the Forty-Second Street ferry. They had all these places you could change and go elsewhere. So I mean transportation was terrific in the state, it really was terrific. Of course the ferryboats and the trolley cars all worked together. They pretty much met the boats.

On the 125th Street ferry, as well as further up on the Dyckman Street ferry and Yonkers ferry, on holiday weekends like Labor Day, Fourth of July, you've gotta remember there was no George Washington bridge. There was no Lincoln Tunnel, there was no Holland Tunnel. In fact, as far as the Holland Tunnel, my wife walked through it the day that it opened. The ferryboats, anyway, on these holidays, it's unbelievable, the lines of cars. The cars would go up over the Palisades, and down over the other side of the Meadows. People waited for many hours to get on a ferryboat on a holiday, to get over to New York. And that was the same at the Yonkers ferry, Dyckman Street ferry, the cars were all the way down to Englewood, in line to get on the ferryboat. Of course, they had every available boat going. They went in and out as fast as they could. But then through the middle of the night on weekdays, they ran about every half-hour. I recall going with a girl who lived on Coney Island, and I'd come home with my 1929 Essex roadster. I bought my ticket for the 125th Street ferry and I sat there waiting for the next boat, and I fell asleep. There was cars behind me, probably two o'clock in the morning, and nobody bumped me. I slept there all night. I got the six o'clock ferry. They just went around me and let me sleep there at 125th Street. It was a different world.

End of Interview